BANK OF CALIFORNIA.

BY PRENTICE MULFORD.

CHAPTER XII.

SUSPICION.

Bending over Pratt I put to him the usual idiotic question under such circumstances:

"Pratt! are you alive!"

"Pratt, are you alive."

The words came from him in a feeble, whining tone:

"No, no! not that way. The lead's higher up—mighty rich, too!"

I managed to get him off the shelf. Further I could not. The only accessible route home wound in places about projections of the mountain several hundred feet perpendicular above the foaming river, where a sound man needed all his strength and nerve to keep a sure footing.

"Them mint fellows are sharp. Jack Hillyear, mind you bake your next batch of bread clean through. Run a straw through—dough sticks if 'tain't done; don't put pork in till beans be boiled so you can squash 'em—else, hard as rocks."

So he rambled on. His words concerning the mint people suggested to me Broener's remark as to their curiosity regarding his quartz assays and their whereabouts. Pratt was evidently delirious. I thought to utilize this wit wandering and said:

"Did the mint people send you up here?"

"Put fresh salt on a bird's tail, an' you'll catch a weasel asleep," was his reply. Then his mind seemed to leap into the old channel. "It's rich—mighty rich—and they can't hold it all."

The thing to be done was to get Pratt to his cabin. Evidently his brain was affected by the wound. I left him and hurried to Hillyear.

Their cabin was built as thousands were in those days—an envelope of cotton drilling about a light wooden frame. There was no wooden door to knock against, or any other method to rouse the inmates save by calling. Call I did, but Hillyear seemed sleeping the sleep of the just. At last, out of patience, I pitched a rock into the frail structure. It tore through the cloth. Hillyear's reply was a shot, which was not to be wondered at.

"For heaven's sake, Hillyear, don't fire! It's me. I've found Pratt. He's hurt badly," I cried.

"Who's me?" asked Hillyear, after one of his periods of silence.

I heard him cocking his pistol. "It's I—Holder. Come and help me get Pratt down off the mountain. He's lying there with a gash in his head."

Mr. Hillyear now relapsed into silence. I knew not whether he was trying to frame an idea into a sentence, or peering out to get an aim at me.

"Ain't you coming?" I cried at last. "Are you going to help me get Pratt down. He'll die before we get to him."

"P-now—did—you—come—to—find—him?" came at length from Mr. Hillyear's lips, with a sort of clownish judicial gravity.

"Good heavens!" I said. "Will you stay there all night and ask questions, while your partner is bleeding to death! Do you suppose I'd get out of my bed to stand and call here like a fool for nothing?"

"What's the muss?" cried a voice in the darkness. It was Bill Sefter, who lived about an eighth of a mile distant. He had come, roused by the shot and the sound of voices.

"I've found Pratt badly hurt on Scrub mountain, and am trying to get Hillyear to help me down with him. Hillyear won't believe me, and that's what's the matter."

"Hillyear, get up! Don't be a fool," said Sefter.

Hillyear finally replied: "All—right! I'm—comin'!" with an expression as if he had had no doubts as to the genuineness of the news, and had but momentarily heard of it.

Our party reached Pratt, where I had left him. With great difficulty we managed to carry him down the mountain. His utterances on the way down all bore vaguely on quartz hunting and the last scene of which he had been conscious while in his right mind. To Sefter, they were a puzzle. To Hillyear, I knew not how much or how little meaning they conveyed. To myself they were a source of great uneasiness. They bore first on the secret of our claim. Next, they might confirm a suspicion, which, if not already developed, I knew was likely to be, through the singular circumstances attending my finding Pratt so far up Scrub mountain in the dead of night. It needed but a word of his delirious utterance to make known that we had quarreled.

We left Pratt in his cabin. Sefter, whose curiosity was evidently much aroused, said to me, just what I expected he would:

"How did you come to find Pratt away up there?"

I told Sefter that I heard Pratt's voice in the night up the mountain, which was true, but not in the sense I left Sefter to infer. I held that evasion was justifiable under the circumstances. It's not so much what we tell that may damage us as the construction placed on it by those it may be told to. The only way I know of when certain questions are asked that many people will ask, to avoid evasion or untruthfulness, is to say "it's none of your business." That, as society is now constituted and complicated, would be quite impossible.

"I wonder who shot him!" continued Sefter.

"Shot himself, maybe," I replied.

"Queer business, anyway," was Sefter's final remark, as he trudged off home.

I saw by his manner that he was full of curiosity, and being full of curiosity would be soon full of theories as to the cause of Pratt's hurt, and that as curiosity and theories are contagious, he would in a short time inoculate all Bull Bar with them.

Next day I visited Pratt. His head had been hurt both by the ball and the fall. The bullet had gashed the temple—not very deeply. The concussion from the fall seemed to have most affected him. That one or other of these wounds had affected his brain was very evident without the pompous declaration of the physician, who had been summoned, to that effect.

Sefter was present when I entered. Pratt was lying on his bed silent, but the sight of me seemed to excite his brain to action, and set in motion the thoughts, scenes and emotions common to the occurrence at the claim.

They ran dangerously near, but did not actually reveal me as a participator.

"No tools! no notices!" he cried. "Pretty way to hold a claim."

"What claim, Pratt?" said Sefter.

The sick man's eye fell on Sefter with a gleam of cunning. "No claim," he said. "We're after rattlesnake oil. Hunting snakes in the chapparal. There's one now—on the lead. If yer not off while I count ten, I'll put a ball through ye. One—two—three—oh!" and he shrieked as if with pain.

Hillyear spoke:

"He—must—be kept—quiet. It—is the—doctor's—orders. The—doctor—says—his—sury—brullum—is—something—or—other."

"Queer business—queer business!" was Sefter's remark, as we left the house together. "I think he's had a shootin' scrape with somebody."

Broener returned. I felt that I could now shift a part of the business to other shoulders.

He heard my story. At its conclusion he settled back and laughed.

"Regular dime novel, isn't it?" said he. "Write it, print it, sell it. Well, young man, you're improving rapidly. I congratulate you. I couldn't have wished you anything better than the experience you've gone through. You needed it. You're the kind that must be put in very hot water to draw anything out of you."

"But won't this put all Bull Bar on the scent of the 'Bank'?" I asked.

"First, let's compound some whisky with sugar, lemons and nutmeg. Before we talk business let's fix things so as to make business a pleasure, not by pouring the stuff down raw as the fools do at the store yonder, but dress up the fluid decently and tastefully before we put it down. There would be far less drunkards if every man was compelled by law to dress up and trim up his drinks in this way before he swallowed them." He continued as he sipped his punch: "Make yourself easy, Holder, about the claim. You have fixed that all right, or the Fates have for you. Pratt won't go up there for a while, now that his wits are knocked out of his head, which for our purpose is better far than knocking them out of his body. Because I'm fool enough to believe that if his wits were out of his body they'd be in much better shape to come back and reveal our secret than as they now are chained to a cracked skull, and therefore in bad working order. Hillyear, from what you say, is, I judge, only an appendage of Pratt's, and not able to do anything without him. At all events, I'll find out soon. As for the 'Bank,' I think I've got the cream out of it already. It's only a feeder to some bigger vein in the mountain. That can lay for awhile. I've got four or five caches of quartz up there that I haven't shown you. We'll get it all down this week and hush up things for the present. There's, I think, your fair share of divvy, so far as we've gone," and he put in my hands a mint certificate of deposit for $14,000. "If the rock that's mined out gives down as I think it will, you'll have as much more coming to you. Are you satisfied?"

Satisfied! Less than a year from home and the possessor of what in Eastport was deemed a "small fortune." In the well-worn phrase, I wanted to "pour forth my thanks."

I said: "I wish I could fully express my feeling and gratitude to you."

"I'm glad you can't," said Broener, interrupting me. "It's a good thing for you that you can't. I hate effusiveness. You may in part thank your reticence and undemonstrativeness for what you call your luck. I don't want any gushers about me. Besides, you've earned what you got—every cent of it. Fate put you and me together, and with that put it in your way. There's no thanks nor gratitude in the matter. I hate people always overwhelmed with gratitude. They're the sort who, if ever they do you what's called a favor, never forget it, and, in effect, want to be paid for it forever afterward. Let's change the subject. There's a traveling theatre company at Chinese Camp to-night. Let's go and see the show. You need a change from the ghastly buzzard spying and body hunting business. Get Rankin's horse, I'll take mine, and we'll gallop over there."

On applying, Mr. Rankin said he would gladly hire me his horse. The animal, he added, was vicious, shied at his own shadow, "bucked" frequently and had been the death of two men. As we were leaving he called out to Broener: "The coroner lives at one end of the camp and is lightenin' on an inquest when sober. The undertaker lives at the other. You'd better take the cloth for the young man's shroud along with you. They know that horse up there and always put an extra ten cents a yard on white linen when they see him comin'."

It seemed another world in that land when riding by night. The sun's hot glare was gone. The air after nightfall was always cool and refreshing, for it came off the snow-banks on the Sierra summits. Our horses were full of life and apparently as glad to make the trip as ourselves. The life of the horse seems to add life to the rider, providing he is a "horseman." Distance at night seems unnoticed. It is more like a dream. One travels forward without so much of that mental straining to reach one point after another as do so often our unhappily constituted hurrying minds in the day time.

So galloped Broener and I, regarding those myriad shining wonders of all ages—the stars.

"Lot's of 'em, aren't there?" said he.

"The stars? Yes."

"Small potatoes we are under them. Smaller than ants in comparison, and moving about on this planet for these shining atoms we call gold. I wonder, now, of what importance poor Pratt, if he had his senses, would consider that biggest star alongside of a pan full of dust. Pratt would trade Venus for a quartz claim."

"Stars, speculation, immortality, etc.," said Broener, as we rode on. "The three seem to go together; or, at all events, stars always start one on those topics. I wonder what we are, anyway—who we are, where we came from, and all the rest. I am a certain amount of life and intelligence in a body. Body's only a garment, a wrap, a machine. Hit a part of the body hard enough, just one blow, and in one second life's all gone, and with it the 'gumption' I've been storing up for years. Hit it not quite as hard, like the crack poor Pratt gave himself, and the intelligence stays but goes to flinders—all hurly-burly. Problem: when you bore a hole with a bullet through a man's head, does all his intellect go out through that hole, and, if so, where does it go to? and might there not be some way of putting a bucket or basin under such a man's head when he's dying, and collecting his intelligence, his quien sabe for one's own use, just as they tap trees for maple sugar? Well, one thing's certain; we're here, anyway, and I put it up that the best plan is to get all the fun we can out of it—body, soul, mind, spirit, and any other little addition the theologians, philosophers and metaphysicians can tack on us."

We rode into the "camp." In the language of the time, it was "bilin'." The theatre company had brought in miners from far and near. It was a single straight street. From every door and window on either side poured a flood of light, for every house on the street, of wood or cloth, was either store, saloon, gambling tent or some place of public resort. Sidewalk, street and houses were alike full of men. The "fandango" was already in full blast. Here, alone, were seen women—dark-skinned senoritas in white dresses, some having their waists encircled by broad bands of pure gold. Riders were momentarily coming in, some urging their horses at a breakneck pace through the street. The air was filled with a medley of sounds—music, shouts, laughter, the hum of several hundred voices gathered in so small an area, the clink of glasses and an occasional yell from some miner giving vent in this way to the emotions within him developed by whisky.

"Come," said Broener. "Let's take a look at the fandango. Everybody goes there either to dance or look on. It's not the low dance house of an old city. You will find there the leading merchants of the place the banker, the lawyer, the judge, and all the other present pillars of society, in this new world of adventurers. Society here, you see, is in a state of effervescence, and everybody's at the top. Hence there's now no bottom. Nor are these Mexican and Chilcanean girls like the 'abandoned' of our American or English cities. They don't get drunk, won't pick your pocket, and though morality sits lightly on them, still they have a certain respect for themselves which keeps them out of gutters."

We went in. Broener was soon whirling one of these tawny beauties about in a waltz. I followed his example. The dance over, we

I followed his example.

"treated" our partners at the bar, as customary, to harmless soda, the only beverage they took, made a pretence of drinking ourselves and left for the theatre.

As we were entering the theatre Broener said: "You must go home alone to-night. I shall not return till some time to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIII.

SURPRISE.

The play was "Othello." It was a farce relative to properties and mounting. Two wings of the signboard style of art had to serve all the scenic demands of the piece. The "dreadful bell" was the tocsin of the Placer hotel, borrowed for the occasion, and its tones being recognized by some of the boarders drew from them the cry, "Time for Bang's hash." The jealous Moor was commented on as the "nigger," and during the entire performance was made a target from the demonstrative portion of the audience for a running fire of combined criticism and admonition, not friendly in its character, and evidently based on the sectional prejudices of those who, coming from the south, looked with no favor on a "nigger" for daring to aspire to the hand of a white maiden. Their ethnological research had never discriminated between Moor and Ethiopian. Iago was the favorite of the house, more and more as the drama advanced, and as he, playing on the Moor's emotions, made him more and more miserable, one enthusiastic commentator bawled out as encouragement: "That's right! sock it to him!"

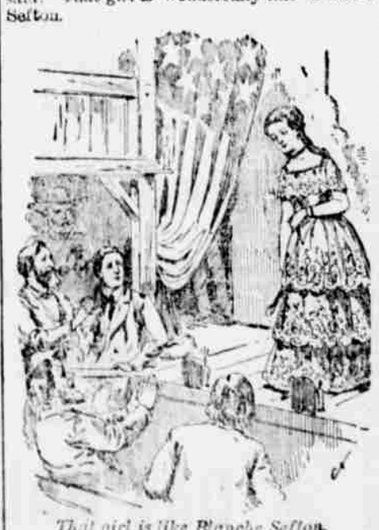
I occupied with Broener one of the two dingy recesses on either side of the stage, dignified by the name of "boxes," and held at $30 each for the night. His keen appreciation of the part continually played by the audience, his hearty relish of the total failure to impress them with aught of the seriousness of the play, and his instant detection of every ludicrous point brought about by the misfit of the drama relative to the time, temper and character of nine-tenths of the lookers on, made his society to me equivalent to a fine comedy played simultaneously with the piece set before us.

In reality many of these rough fellows were critics, in their way, of no mean order, though themselves entirely unaware of it. I think that their years of isolation from the conventional life of the older settled localities from which they originally came, and the lack of sham and pretence in the life they now led, had quickened their minds to discriminate between what was natural and what was artificial—what was acted with real emotion and what was merely stilted declamation, as much of the piece before us was on the part of the principal character.

So, when Iago's wife, who, it will be remembered, is but little prominent in the first action of this drama, stigmatized her scheming husband and wished for a whip to scourge such scoundrels through the world, the house "rose to her."

I had ceased to pay much attention to the play, being more interested in the motley and tumultuous audience. But the voice of this actress seemed strangely familiar.

I regarded her closely, and my thought said: That girl is wonderfully like Blanche Sefton.



That girl is like Blanche Sefton.

Impossible! I looked, after that, but at that one figure. The pose and bearing were those of Blanche. In standing, Blanche's attitude always gave one the impression that she alone owned the ground she then stood over. In speaking, or when spoken to, she seemed to turn her whole mind in the direction of the subject of the moment, and never seemed in mind to stray or waver from that subject.

So did this actress. But the make-up puzzled me. Hair, eyebrows, complexion were different. The voice was pitched in a higher key than ever I had heard from Blanche.

Once let the doubt beset you as to the identity of any person long unseen, or seen suddenly under unexpected circumstances, and generally that doubt remains until dispelled by certain recognition and indentification. So did mine then as to the identity of the person before me.

"That gal means bizness," I heard one man whisper to another. "Put her in a tight place, and she'd shoot."

I noticed that Broener was regarding her as attentively as I. He heard the remark mentioned above and smiled, saying: "Rough diamonds. One as a character reader in the house, and one—a brilliant on the stage."

I looked for her name in the cast on the roughly printed programme. It read:

"Miss H. Brown."

The stage was not more than twenty feet in width. Once she stood so near the box I could have reached forth and touched her. Height, contour, bearing—all resembled those of Blanche Sefton. But as to the face, that was so "made up" as to leave me in doubt. Once her eyes ranged across the box where I sat. They were Blanche Sefton's eyes, but there was no recognition in their expression. Physically they looked at me—otherwise they seemed no more to see me than would those of a wax figure.

The play was over. The curtain fell. The audience struggled in a congested state for exit from the one narrow front entrance. Broener turned in the opposite direction toward a door leading to the stage, saying: "I have an old friend in the company and am going behind the scenes. Good night."

He had gone. I would go to the stage door in the rear, and in some way solve my doubts. But I was impeded by the crowd. A wretched fracas, between two armed inebriates, had developed directly in front of the "opera house," and the lingering mass, nothing loth to see blood shed, cluttered up the passageway and sidewalk.

Freeing myself from them at last I sought the stage door. A high board fence ran from the middle of the rear of the theatre, which in reality was but the wing of another house. I got on the wrong side of the fence, ran back and was obliged to pass out again in front of the theatre. At last I stood by the door I sought. Two ladies and their escort passed out. She certainly was not of them. The third and last, closely veiled, finally came, and accompanying her was Broener!

Of course, my friend, you would have stayed in camp that night, and found out "somehow" whether the girl was Blanche Sefton or not. I didn't. Had I not seen the lady with Broener I might have so done. But his presence put such a complexion on the matter, that of the two situations I preferred to be in doubt as to Blanche's identity to finding her thus with Broener, whom of course I pictured as the "dangerous rival," as certainly he was in almost any case.

Besides there were imperative interests at Scrub mountain to be looked after immediately. Broener expected me to get the quartz out of the caches down to the cabin as soon as possible. He had given me directions how to find them, and despite his repulsion of everything from me of gratitude, I felt under too much obligation to him to neglect anything bearing on his interests.

But the stars on the now long sixteen-mile ride homeward had lost their sublimity for me. My brain was in a ferment of conjecture. Was it Blanche Sefton? and if so, why was Broener with her? He had gone behind the scenes to see an "old friend." Blanche was a mysterious girl. She had passed much of her time away from home and in New York, having frequent access thereunto by her father's sloop. She had a way of coming and going and locating herself about where she pleased with that matter-of-course, authoritative air which half stifled gossip and enabled her to do what other girls dared not and could not. People said, "Oh, it's Blanche's way." Certainly it was, and whom might she have met and known, unknown to all Eastport, in these "ways"?

Half-past three o'clock and the morning had dawned as I drew rein on the hill and looked down on Bull Bar, half a mile below me. The river, shrunk by the summer drought, ran a mere thread with faint murmur over rock and riffle. Log cabin and tent lay there silent in the cool shadow of early dawn. One mountain top, full thirty miles away, had caught the sun's heralding ray for the day. But down there, rocker and long tom, pick and pan, crowbar and shovel were flung where last the weary workers left them, and the five hundred stalwart men, soon to renew their battle with hill, bank and stream, were still in the unconsciousness of slumber—alive, breathing, it is true, but dead to the world their bodies were in—dead to all hope or fear or any of the varied emotions which would so soon be in full play when the smoke commenced circling from those rude chimneys.

Two or three moving figures were seen on the river bank—watchers of the night—guarding against any sudden rise of the stream liable through the breaking of dams above and letting down the vast body of "backwater," a fluid avalanche which would sweep before it like chaff man's frail constructions.

I roused Mr. Rankin and returned him his horse, which he put in the stable with the remark that "yesterday was probably his benevolent day, which would account for my return alive. But the next man dies," he added.

Broener returned late in the day. What a different man was he to me from yesterday. Despite the uncertainty regarding Blanche, I sympathized now with the Moor's ruling passion. Jealous? Yes, and jealous of Broener. All of him that had previously attracted me were now as so many weapons turned against me—brilliant weapons, too, and used by a skilled hand.

He noticed the change in me—I cannot say in my manner. I had rather state it that he *felt* a change—something between us—coming through those fine interior senses which feel, and sense thoughts, as the outer ones do material things.

"You seem out of sorts," he said.

I laid it to a headache—that convenient beast of burden, which bears so many lies!

"Young man," said he that evening, "were you ever in love?"

"I suppose so," I replied. "They say its part of the programme along with whooping cough and the measles."

"Well," he rejoined, "I believe I am, so far as I am capable of being. At all events, I've found a woman who I think can hold me."

"May I ask who she is?"

"Oh, yes. It is the girl you saw last night playing the wife to Iago."

Silently we puffed our cigars simultaneously for a few seconds. A cigar is a great relief to a "throbbing heart." I was never conscious of much action of such character on the part of that organ, and use the phrase as covering a good deal of ground applicable to these peculiar situations. I said:

"Will you think I'm inquisitive if I inquire if you have known her long?"

"Not at all. I made her acquaintance a few years ago in a New York boarding-house kept by her aunt, whom she was visiting. I met her, strangely enough, on my recent trip to San Francisco. She had just come out by the Isthmus with the company you saw. I recognized her on the stage in San Francisco."

"Is Brown her real name?"

"No."

I dared not ask *the name*. Broener resumed after a pause:

"That girl puzzles me. I can't make her out. Probably if I could I should not be so much attracted to her. I find that mine is a nature always demanding to fathom—see through—women, and ceasing to worship them when seen through."

I felt then a gleam of comfort. If it was Blanche Sefton, I more than hoped that Broener had no shallow depth to fathom. Yet I still feared him. He was to me deep, diabolically deep, and powerful, too.

"Perhaps you've met your match at last," I ventured to say.

"Well, I hope I have. I need—a match. Excuse me," he added; "I detest puns and punsters. This was an accident. She's a strong character—self-poised, self-reliant, impassioned on the outside with boiling depths below, which no one has ever yet brought to the surface—at least, I judge so. She's miles beyond the people she's traveling with. They see and know of her only as much as she chooses to show—a tenth, perhaps only a twentieth—only what they're able to see and appreciate, or what she allows them to see. Good judgment, that. No use in showing any more cards than you want to use—in any game."

"Do you call her's a game, too?" I asked.

"As I look on life and people—yes. Yet possibly with her, thus far, an unconscious one as to motive. What some call nobility of character, is so well expressed with her that I am content to admire it without too deeply analyzing it."

"You fear, then, you might find the base metal underneath the gilding?"

"My boy, I don't care to put myself on that train of thought. If I pursue an illusion, I want it ever to remain one."

I forbore from asking if he knew her real name. Broener's indefinable manner said to me, plain as words, "Hands off."

"I shall go to Marysville next week," he said after a pause. "The company play there on the 20th."

"Well," I thought to myself, as I crept into my blankets, "Marysville, love and mystery on one side. Pratt, hatred and more mystery for Bull Bar on the other. I seem to be a fulcrum for events to teeter on."

[To be Continued.]